

The Charlestown Story

THE LEGACY OF CHARLES RASHLEIGH



Harboured ambitions – Porthmuer reborn

Although there is evidence of habitation from the Neolithic and Bronze Ages to the north of the village, the recorded history of Charlestown can be traced back to at least the mid 14th century. Historical records from 1354 identify the settlement as Portmeor or Porthmuer, derived from the Cornish words *porth* (cove) and *meur* (great).

Even by the 1760s there was little to Porthmuer besides a few very humble dwellings and a small fishing fleet. However, with the expansion of nearby St Austell, the bay at Porthmuer became an increasingly popular spot where cargo could be loaded and unloaded from the beach.

This potential for developing Porthmuer into a harbour for the booming tin, copper and china clay industries was seen by Charles Rashleigh, a local lawyer, investor and entrepreneur. He bought land near the village in 1779 and started building a grand house for himself and his young family at Duporth. The fortunes of small Porthmuer were about to change.

Charles Rashleigh working with the engineer, John Smeaton, began building the harbour in 1791 and by the turn of the century, with the harbour complete, the village was thriving. Imports of coal, timber and lime and exports of copper ore and china clay created a bustling port supported by shipwrights, ropemakers, blacksmiths and chandlers. A pilchard fishing fleet exploited riches from the sea and lime was burned to improve the nearby land for farming. Cottages, shops, pubs and hotels were built to support the growing population and a gun battery on the cliff overlooking the harbour, protected it from the threat of French invasion. In less than ten years the population had grown to over 800.

Whilst his port continued to thrive, the personal fortunes of Rashleigh took a turn for the worse when he was embezzled by two of his employees and he died in 1823, largely bankrupt. His legacy however was permanently remembered with the naming of the village in his honour as Charles' Town in around 1800.

Charles Rashleigh – Georgian Entrepreneur

Charlestown owes its very existence to this Georgian lawyer, businessman and philanthropist. Before 1791 – the year that Rashleigh embarked on building a harbour to serve the local mines and town of St Austell – Porthmuer, as it was then known, was little more than a small fishing hamlet.



Within 10 years Rashleigh had transformed the small coastal settlement into a bustling port and Porthmuer was renamed Charles' Town in honour of its entrepreneurial founder.



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Shipping in Charlestown Harbour in the late 1800s

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The turning tides of fortune

After Rashleigh's death, the village was governed by the Charlestown Estate Company whose close and sober management of village affairs for over 160 years was largely responsible for the preservation of Charlestown's character that is still in evidence today.

By the 1850s tin and copper mining were declining however Charlestown remained a bustling port thanks to the increasing importance of china clay. Wagon loads of clay entered the village from the numerous pits around St Austell and ships filled the dock taking the "white gold" all over the world. Imports of coal enabled the clay to be dried more efficiently and two clay dries were built in the village.

In the later half of the 20th century however, Charlestown's share in the china clay trade started to wane as the small port began losing out to nearby Par and Fowey which could accommodate larger vessels. Plans to expand the port and connect it to the railway never materialised and the clay boats became an increasingly rare sight with the last commercial shipment leaving the port in 1999.

During the 1980s, with the breakup of the long running Charlestown Estate, the future of the village looked uncertain, but it was about to once more find prosperity. Recognising its unspoilt look, filmmakers used Charlestown as a suitable backdrop for historic productions. The village became home to traditional sailing vessels along with crafts needed to maintain them and so began a period, which continues today, where Charlestown could regularly be seen in films and on TV.

The picturesque setting of Charlestown has always attracted visitors, but it was perhaps the dedication of the village as a World Heritage Site in 2006 and the filming, in the 2010s, of the fictional BBC series *Poldark* that has given the village wider publicity and attracted many more people who come to enjoy the same sight that Charles Rashleigh himself would have experienced over 200 years ago.

Village timeline

1354

First documented record of Porthmuer, as a small fishing hamlet

1781

Charles Rashleigh sets up home at nearby Duporth

1791

Work starts on the building of the harbour

1800

Harbour building completed and village renamed Charlestown

1873

Inner Dock expanded

1908

China Clay Dries completed

1999

Last commercial cargo leaves the port

2006

Charlestown granted World Heritage Site status



Loading china clay, via chutes, to ships in the early 1900's

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